

You Fortunate Paupers

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- [0 : 00] We were leaving the restaurant where we had been talking about Jesus and his call to discipleship. I'm not going to make it, he said. I simply do not have what it takes.
- He said it in all seriousness and with a deep sense of sadness. I see what Jesus calls you and me to be and do.
- I see that he's calling us to a qualitatively different kind of life. Given the condition of the world, the massive needs all around us, how could he do otherwise?
- Given who he is, he has to call us beyond what we know. I would not want him to call us to anything less. But I am not going to make it.
- I just do not have what it takes. I have good news for my friend and for anyone else who feels the way he does.
- [1 : 05] Yes, you are going to make it. The problem is you have misunderstood what Jesus is doing in his Beatitudes and Sermon on the Mount.
- Given the original context in which Jesus spoke and given the performative power of Jesus' word, we are going to make it.
- In fact, the fact that we feel we are not going to make it is an indication that we already are making it.
- Will you now give your attention to Jesus as he speaks his Beatitudes to us again, as they are recorded for us in the Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 5, verses 3 through 12.
- Kima, would you come and help us here? Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down.
- [2 : 30] His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them, saying, Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
- Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.
- Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.
- Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the people of heaven.
- [4 : 09] Lord Jesus Christ, how grateful we are that you enabled Matthew, the tax collector, to remember your words and then write them down for us.
- Will you now help us understand your words? And more than understand, will you help us actually live them? For this we pray in your name.
- Amen. Amen. Amen. As I emphasized last Sunday in the introductory study to Jesus' Beatitudes, separate the Beatitudes from the original context in which Jesus spoke them, and they become either frustrating idealism or oppressive legalism.

So the question we ask again is, what is the gospel?

What is Jesus' gospel? What is the good news according to Jesus of Nazareth? Ready? The gospel according to Jesus is the announcement of a great fact.

[5 : 39] Because of the sheer magnitude of this great fact, it by necessity impacts every other fact. The gospel according to Jesus is the announcement that in him and because of him, the long-awaited, future, thought-to-be-future kingdom of God is breaking into the world.

We hear Jesus say in Mark 1.15, The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe this good news.

The gospel according to Jesus of Nazareth is that history has reached a major crisis point. The future is spilling over into the present.

Heaven is invading the earth. Now I want to give you or share with you a diagram that helps us understand Jesus' gospel.

I received this diagram some 40 years ago now, at least in embryonic form, from Professor George Ladd, the biblical scholar to whom I owe the greatest debt.

[6 : 49] The diagram puts Jesus and his gospel in historical context. The diagram is a timeline, a timeline of how God has dealt with humanity throughout the ages.

The timeline begins with creation and leads to the new creation. It begins with God creating the heavens and the earth and we humans within it, and it leads to God recreating the heavens and the earth and we humans within it.

We begin with God speaking us into being in his good world. We then move to the sad and tragic chapter where humans made the decision to go it alone, to no longer let God be God and to take our lives into our own hands.

We fell. It is then that we first encounter the God of mercy and grace. For no sooner had humans rebelled against God that God made a promise that one day he would come and he would renew the ruin we caused.

In the now fallen world, in the garden that was becoming a cemetery, God began what is called salvation history. And as God unfolded the plan, it became clear that history was moving to a special day, to a great day, to the great day of the Lord as the Old Testament prophets called it.

[8 : 18] On that day, God would intervene in history in a radical way. On that day, sin would be removed, evil would be overcome and banished, and death would be no more.

On that day, the kingdom of God would come into the world. Now here is the gospel according to Jesus of Nazareth.

Ahead of that great day, God comes into the world. Jesus is, as Matthew calls him in the Christmas story, a few chapters before the Beatitudes, Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us, or more literally, the with us God.

Ahead of the great day of the Lord, the Lord himself comes into the world and he brings with him his kingdom. The cross on the diagram stands for all that is involved in Jesus' coming.

His birth, his life, his ministry, his death, his resurrection, his ascension, and his pouring out of the Holy Spirit. The coming of Jesus, God with us, is the coming of the kingdom of God.

[9 : 32] Jesus' coming near means that the kingdom of God is coming near, ahead of time, ahead of the great day of the Lord.

Jesus' gospel is the announcement of this great fact, that the future is spilling over into the present, and that heaven is invading the earth.

Now, it is in that context that Jesus first speaks his Beatitudes. Separate his Beatitudes from his gospel, and they become either frustrating idealism or oppressive legalism.

For you see, in his Beatitudes, Jesus is simply describing what happens to human beings when his gospel grabs hold. In his Beatitudes, Jesus is simply giving us a profile of the new humanity that happens, of the new humanity that emerges when the reign of God breaks into our brokenness.

In the Beatitudes, Jesus is painting a picture of people who are in sync with this great fact. And the first stroke of this portrait is, Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

[11 : 04] Notice the position of the pronoun in the first Beatitude. The pronoun theirs. It stands at the beginning of the Beatitude for emphasis. Theirs is the kingdom, or literally, of them is the kingdom.

The implication being, theirs and only theirs, of them and only of them. And note the verb is, not will be, not theirs will be, the kingdom, but theirs is, present, now, already, today.

I am so glad that Jesus began on this note. Will you say the words with me? Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Again, please. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Now, I want to ask three questions of this first Beatitude.

Question number one, what does poor in spirit mean? Question number two, why is poverty of spirit a sign that the gospel is grabbing hold?

[12 : 14] A sign that we are in sync with this great fact? And question three, is there ever a time when we are rich in spirit? So the first question, what does it mean?

What does Jesus mean by poor in spirit? Second question, why is this poverty of spirit a mark that the kingdom of God has come? And third, is there ever a time when we will be rich in spirit?

Okay. Question one, what does Jesus mean by poor in spirit? In New Testament, in the Greek New Testament, there are two words that are translated poor.

One of them describes people who have nothing and therefore have to work all day to get it. The other, tukoi, describes people who are so destitute they are forced to beg.

The first word refers to those who at least have the bare essentials. The second refers to those who have absolutely nothing. Nothing. And they know it.

[13 : 19] It's this second word, tukoi, that Jesus uses. Blessed are the tukoi in spirit. Blessed are the destitute in spirit.

Blessed are the beggarly poor in spirit. Beggars come with empty hands and empty pockets. They have nothing with which to buy help.

Congratulations, says the bringer of the kingdom. Right on, says the savior of the world. Right up are those who come to God with empty hands. In sync are those who approach the living God with empty pockets.

The poor in spirit are those who know that they have nothing with which to buy the kingdom. The poor in spirit are those who know that they are at the mercy of the kingdom giver.

Surprise! You lucky bums, you get the kingdom. Now, as you may know, in the gospel according to Luke, we have another version of Jesus' first beatitude.

[14 : 32] Jesus says in Matthew, blessed are the poor in spirit. In Luke, he says, blessed are the poor. So we have a different version of this beatitude. Or is it that Luke records a different sermon Jesus preached on another occasion?

Is it that, like any good teacher, Jesus repeated himself on many different occasions as he unfolded the nature of the kingdom? Is it that Matthew records for us the sermon Jesus preached on the mountainside, hence the sermon on the mount, and Luke records for us a sermon Jesus preaches a little later on a level place, hence the sermon on the plain?

At any rate, in Luke, Jesus says, blessed are the poor, full stop. Luke 6, 20. Blessed are the poor, period. Whereas in Matthew, Jesus says, blessed are the poor in spirit.

What gives? As many scholars have asked, has Matthew spiritualized Luke by adding in spirit? Or has Luke socialized Matthew by dropping in spirit?

As I've wrestled with this over the years, I've come to the conclusion that these two versions of the Beatitude are getting at the same thing. And let me try to explain. Throughout the Bible, we meet a God who, quote, is the champion of the powerless.

[16 : 03] Would you agree? Why is Israel, for instance, chosen to be the nation through whom God will bless all other nations? Because, as Israel herself acknowledged, Israel was powerless before those who thought they had the power.

Throughout the Bible, there seems to be, quote, a divine preference for the powerless. A preference for orphans, widows, prisoners, alien, and the poor.

Yet, nowhere in the Bible is material poverty held out to be the ideal human condition. Nowhere in the Bible, in the story, is the living God happy when people are materially poor.

It would be wrong to take Jesus' words in Luke to mean it is good to be poor and that therefore only the materially poor get into the kingdom. Although Luke, more than any of the other gospel writers, stresses Jesus' teaching on the poor, Luke never romanticizes.

He never celebrates material poverty. Well, why then bless the poor in Luke's version? Why are the poor congratulated?

[17 : 18] Why blessed are the poor, period? I think it's because of the resultant attitude. The poor know they need help from outside themselves.

The poor know they need God and therefore live depending on God. The poor have only one hope. Their whole existence is resting in God and in God alone.

And that's why Mother Teresa loved working with the poor. And that's why Jesus pronounces his in sync on the poor. You see, in the Bible, the opposite of poor is not rich.

That might surprise you. In the Bible, the opposite of poor is violent. Those who take their life into their own hands.

In Luke's gospel, Jesus goes on to speak a woe on the rich. Not because they have much, but because of the attitude what they have produces.

[18 : 26] The attitude of not needing God. The attitude of not living dependent on God. The rich, and most of us in this room fall into this category, have, or think we have, other grounds for hope than the living God.

Until an earthquake shakes buildings, or a hurricane sweeps through a city, or a recession decimates pension funds. I've observed, and I think you would agree with me, the poor are not shaken by such events.

And that's because the poor are not deceived into thinking that riches are their security for the future. the poor do not inherit the kingdom of God because they are materially poor.

That would be a perversion of the gospel. That would be salvation by social class. The poor who inherit the kingdom of God are the poor in spirit who stand before God and the world in utter helplessness.

Robert Gulick, in his really fine work on the Sermon on the Mount, I think puts everything in perspective best. Gulick writes, the poor in spirit, the poor in Judaism refer to those in desperate need, socioeconomic element, whose helplessness drove them to a dependent relationship with God, religious element for the supplying of their need.

[20 : 02] The poor in spirit are those who find themselves waiting, empty handed upon God alone for their hope and deliverance. surprise, surprise, surprise.

Jesus switches the price tags. It is the powerless. It is the spiritually bankrupt. It is those who feel inadequate in the things of God who experience the coming of the kingdom.

And that's why my friend Dale Bruner can say, the Sermon on the Mount is, spiritually speaking, actually, the Sermon from the Valley. It starts low. It starts with those who feel very unlike mountains.

Right on, says Jesus, in alignment, in sync, for theirs are the glorious benefits of the rule of God. God, I should have had at least one amen somewhere by now.

Because I just gave you grace. Big time. Now, as a matter of fact, all human beings are spiritually bankrupt.

[21 : 21] Apart from Jesus Christ, we have nothing to bring before the living God. However, not everyone acknowledges this. Therefore, the poor in spirit whom Jesus blesses are those who recognize and admit their spiritual poverty.

The beggarly poor have laid aside all pretense. The beggarly poor have laid aside all the denial games. The beggarly poor are aware they are fundamentally helpless and they admit it and they hear Jesus blessed.

it. Now, as I said last Sunday, the qualities Jesus blesses in his beatitudes are not natural human qualities.

Rather, they are the result of having been grabbed by his gospel. Jesus did not come into the world looking for beatitude people he could call into his kingdom. Rather, Jesus came into the world, called people to himself, and as a result of ongoing encounter with him, these qualities began to emerge in their lives.

So, question two, why is poverty of spirit a mark of those grabbed by the gospel? And why is it the first one?

[22 : 37] I'm not sure that I can adequately say what I want to say on this. So, let me just try. When we encounter Jesus Christ as he really is, beyond our inadequate understanding of him, when we encounter Jesus Christ in all of his glory, full of grace and truth, we see ourselves as we really are.

Loved by him, extravagantly so, but also falling short of the glory of God, woefully so. Am I right? When the light of his in breaking kingdom dawns upon us, when the glory of his new world order is revealed to us, we become aware as never before of how far we fall from the glory of God.

Jesus said just before he went to the cross in John 15, 22, if I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have known sin. If I had not done among them the works no one else did, they would not have known sin.

Jesus is saying that it is his mere presence which makes us aware just how far we are off from the things of God. We see him as he is and we see ourselves as we are.

And like the tax collector in Jesus' parable, we cry out, Lord, have mercy on me. The Pharisee in Jesus' parable could go on and on about his spiritual achievement because he was only comparing himself to other people.

[24 : 21] You can always find someone that's worse off than you. You can always find someone who is prouder than you and therefore pat yourself on the back for not being so proud.

But once we are confronted by the purity and compassion, the integrity and peace of Jesus of Nazareth, the illusion breaks.

And like Peter, we fall at his feet and cry out, depart from me, O Lord, for I am a sinful man. Peter there is not suffering from a poor self-esteem problem.

It's just that he has been arrested by the infinite qualitative difference between who he is and who he was made to be as reflected in Jesus Christ.

It was while reading Imitation of Christ by Thomas Akempis that John Newton wrote the hymn Amazing Grace. It was then that he came to the blessedness of his own spiritual poverty.

[25 : 25] Before his encounter with Jesus Christ, John Newton, who was a skipper of an English slave trading ship, John Newton thought of himself as quite a decent chap. Thank you.

then the light broke in. Then the kingdom of God invaded his life. And his hymn is his personal testimony.

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. Wretch is Newton's word. Nobody called him a wretch.

It's simply what he discovered in the presence of Jesus Christ. What else was he supposed to call a slave trader in the presence of Jesus?

I once was lost, but now found, was blind, but now I see. Now I see that in the presence of the living God, how woefully poor I am in spirit.

[26 : 22] And that's why in the second verse of his hymn, he goes on to sing, "'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear." Grace teaches the human heart to fear.

Yes, because grace first makes us see what we are apart from grace. The gospel of God's new world order first caused Newton to see how wretched a place in the old order he had.

And then he made the greatest discovery of his life, that this new order, this kingdom of God, was for those who recognized their spiritual bankruptcy.

And so he sang, "'Twas grace my fears relieved." I am so glad Jesus began his description of the new humanity on this note.

For every time I go on and read the rest of the New Testament, I find myself hanging my head and wondering if I can make it.

[27 : 27] I hear whoever is angry with his brother or sister shall be liable to the court. I hear whoever looks at a woman to lust after her has committed adultery with her in his heart.

I hear no one can serve two masters. You cannot serve God and mammon. I hear do not be anxious for tomorrow. Do not be anxious about your life. And I hang my head. I hear let your yes be yes and your no be no.

Anything beyond that is the evil one. I hear do not resist the one who is evil, but whoever slaps you, turn to him the right cheek also. I hear him say love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you.

I hear him say not everyone who says to me Lord, Lord will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my father who is in heaven. And I cry out Lord, I do not have what it takes to be what you want me to be.

And I hear bless it. Congratulations. you are right on. You are in sync with reality.

[28 : 34] Brennan Manning, do you know this name, Brennan Manning? Spent most of his life as a priest before the light of the kingdom dawned into him. And he suggests that the poor in spirit are like the survivors of a shipwreck.

the survivors of a shipwreck. Out at sea, says Manning, out at sea, all the things that they used to rely on, past achievements, accumulated treasures, titles and degrees, out at sea, they don't matter anymore.

All that matters out at sea is this plank that's come by that you grab hold of. Manning writes, the shipwrecked have stood at the still point of the turning world and discover that the human heart was made for Jesus Christ and cannot really be content with less.

They cannot take seriously the demands that the world makes on them. We were made for Christ and nothing less will ever satisfy us. He goes on, the shipwrecks have little in common with the landlocked.

The landlocked have all their security system, their home base, credentials in barns, their self-interest and investments intact. They never find themselves because they never really feel themselves lost.

[29 : 51] The shipwrecked, on the contrary, reached out for that passing plank with the desperation of the drowning, adrift on an angry sea in a state of utter helplessness and vulnerability. The shipwrecked never asked what they could do to merit the plank and inherit the kingdom of dry land.

They know that there was absolutely nothing any of them could do. And then Manning writes this, like little children, they simply receive the plank as a gift.

And little children are precisely those who have not done anything. Unless you become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven, Jesus says. Jesus is not suggesting that heaven is a vast playground for infants.

Children are our model because they have no claim on heaven. if they are close to God, Simon Tugwald says, it is not because they are innocent, but because they are incompetent.

Blessed are they incompetent in spirit. For theirs and only theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

[31 : 05] How do you respond to this first beatitude? It is a kind of death, isn't it?

Kind of death? It is death, isn't it, Mickey? Death to self-sufficiency, death to self-saviorship.

But since self-sufficiency and self-saviorship are illusions, this death is a birth. As any of those who have practiced the 12-step program can tell us, it was when they faced their powerlessness that they were beginning to be free.

The poor in spirit are those who know they do not have it all together and who know that they cannot get it all together. They are therefore ready to receive.

They are therefore finally willing to receive. question three. Is there ever a time when we are rich in spirit?

[32 : 15] Yes and no. No, because we were created to live dependently. There will never be a time when we cannot make it without Jesus Christ.

even in the new creation. In fact, in the new creation we will be gladly dependent. But even there we are dependent. Someone has said, even in that life there will be need for supplies from outside ourselves.

Even there we shall not be independent of God. Oh, blessed absence of self-sufficiency, we shall never be self-contained. So, no, there will never be a time when on our own we are rich in spirit.

But yes, yes, there is a time when we are rich in spirit. When? Every time we are poor in spirit.

For every time we are poor in spirit, Jesus says to us, yours is the kingdom. Yours, all of it, the kingdom. Everything God's glorious new world order entails, it's all yours.

[33 : 22] Forgiveness of sin, cleansing, deep cleansing, freedom, freshness, wisdom, power, truth, hope, light, holiness, community, fullness, the fullness of the spirit, the gifts of the spirit, creativity.

It's all yours, Jesus said. You lucky bums, you fortunate poppers, yours is the kingdom.

Amen indeed.